

Keeping the Adversary's Secrets Secret

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Review of Austin Carson, *"Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics"* (Princeton University Press, 2018)

In a series of memos written in late 1951 and early 1952, in the midst of the Korean War, U.S. intelligence agencies concluded that a "de facto air war exists over North Korea between the UN and the USSR." As many as 30,000 Russians were "physically involved in the Korean War," the CIA reported, piloting more than 150 aircraft in daily combat missions. Within a decade of the beginning of the Cold War, direct combat was already under way between the two superpowers. Yet both the United States and the Soviet Union kept it secret.

Why did the Soviet Union intervene covertly in the Korean War, despite having good reason to assume that the United States would detect its intervention? More puzzling, why did the U.S. government, after it had detected the presence of Russian pilots, play along—preserving the Soviets' secret until the declassification of a wave of U.S. intelligence documents a half-century later? Why would adversarial states ever collude to keep each other's secrets?

The answer to these puzzles, argues Austin Carson in his excellent new book, *"Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics,"* lies in states' desire for escalation control. The need to prevent limited confrontations from turning into all-out wars can drive states

to intervene covertly and encourage other major powers to refrain from blowing the whistle. Examples of covert interventions and collusive secrecy, Carson argues, are much more common than scholars have previously recognized, playing an important role in wars ranging from the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s to current conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. His book is the latest addition to a burgeoning literature that has emerged in the past decade on the role of secrecy and deception in diplomacy, crisis bargaining, strategic decision-making, international institutions, military operations and international law.

The idea that control of escalation during wartime poses serious challenges for states is not new: It has been a major concern of theorists from Carl von Clausewitz to Thomas Schelling. But the importance of mutually advantageous secrecy (as opposed to the use of secrecy to keep things from the enemy) in reducing the risks of uncontrolled escalation has never been explored this thoroughly. For Carson, two threats to the control of war are especially relevant: hawkish domestic politics that can force leaders to respond aggressively to provocations, and the risks of miscommunication between adversaries, who will often be inclined to assume the worst about each other's

intentions. Secrecy helps states solve both these problems: It insulates leaders from domestic hawkish pressures while sending the message that the intervener is serious enough about its interests to intervene, but also restrained enough to avoid an open provocation. “This blend of moderate resolve and moderate restraint,” writes Carson, “can be ideally suited to producing the shared understanding that is key to controlling escalation and limiting war.”

Carson’s book begins in the 1930s, with the Spanish Civil War—a conflict that featured covert interventions by Italy, Germany and the Soviet Union—and ends in the early 2000s, with Iran’s covert supply of weapons to Shiite militias during the American occupation of Iraq. In a series of detailed case studies, Carson also discusses the Soviet-American air-to-air combat during the Korean War, covert operations during the Vietnam War, and covert external involvement in Afghanistan toward the end of the Cold War. Throughout, he shows how major powers found ways to intervene in foreign conflicts while keeping the potential for escalation under control. Rival great powers, he shows, were often well aware of their adversary’s secret activity, but colluded in keeping it secret to avoid wars getting out of hand. (Carson uses the term “collusion” to refer to mostly *de facto*, tacit cooperation between rivals, rather than the sort of explicit, active collusion that might spring to mind.) The refusal to acknowledge widely exposed covert interventions, or “open secrets”—think of the presence of Russians in eastern Ukraine or American covert aid to rebel groups in the Syrian civil war—still helped limit wars by communicating a degree of restraint. Carson traces all of this back to World War I, which underscored the dangers of large-scale escalations. After the war, strategists embraced covert military interventions as a means of escalation control, a development aided by the emergence of new technologies, such as airpower and

the submarine, that made it easier for states to use force anonymously.

Throughout, Carson’s archival research is impressive. In his case study of the Spanish Civil War, he uncovers fascinating records that show Nazi Germany tracking Soviet covert involvement in Spain and carefully adjusting its own covert participation there to avoid emboldening hawkish public sentiment in France and the United Kingdom. Later, he describes remarkably candid declassified records that show how American policymakers foresaw and then monitored casualties inflicted by covertly deployed Chinese and Soviet forces in Korea. Carson is optimistic—perhaps excessively so—about the ability of states to learn from experience. Over the course of the 20th century, he argues, leaders gradually figured out how to exploit secrecy and collusion to avoid inflaming their domestic audiences and miscommunicating with their adversaries—one reason, he suggests provocatively, that great powers avoided a third world war, even as they continued to wage numerous local, proxy conflicts.

One of the richest parts of Carson’s book is his discussion of the work of anthropologists and sociologists, which is often neglected by contemporary international relations theorists. Whereas most contemporary political scientists view the manipulation of information as an instrumental activity that serves selfish ends, such as a better bargaining position or an operational advantage, sociologists and anthropologists have emphasized the ways in which secrecy can help groups collectively define the nature of a given social interaction and maintain social stability. In an influential metaphor, the sociologist Erving Goffman described social life as a theater in which participants tailor their appearances to conform to contextually appropriate roles, and thus help preserve a coherent social order. Secrecy plays an important role in this process, operating like the backstage

of a theater and allowing performers to engage in what Goffman called “information control,” concealing actions that are inconsistent with the rules and roles of a given social situation. Even rivals share a desire to preserve a stable definition of a competitive encounter—to preserve the basic framework of rules and norms within which they’re competing—producing a “general conspiracy to save face so that social situations can also be saved.”

Carson connects this theatrical analogy to the idea of limited war, in which secrecy helps both sides maintain the appearance of a well-defined, localized conflict. States are like actors moving between a “frontstage”—a space in which their behavior is visible and widely acknowledged—and a “backstage”—a place where their actions are visible only to the other performers, at least most of the time. The audience, in this analogy, is the domestic public; the “performance” that emerges, when successful, is limited war. Rivals may tacitly collude to push dangerous confrontations to the backstage, out of sight of hawkish domestic audiences, preserving the illusion of a limited war and thereby helping avoid further conflict escalation.

This metaphor is invaluable in highlighting some of the complex ways in which states communicate under conditions of pervasive uncertainty and against a backdrop of anarchic competition. It highlights, Carson writes, “leaders’ desire to explicitly or implicitly *collaborate* in grooming the basic *definition* of their conflict encounter.” This helps explain why states often persist in ostensibly secret policies that fool no one: The distinction between knowledge and acknowledgement is crucial. For example, as legal scholar Alexandra Perina has argued, if states refuse to admit what they’re doing, covert acts cannot constitute evidence of state practice that forms customary international law or reflects states’ interpretations of their treaty

obligations. Acknowledging secret programs, even when they are widely known, is thus a strategic decision that can set in motion its own political consequences.

For all the strengths of Carson’s book, several questions remain insufficiently addressed. How do covertness and collusion play out between nonstate actors, such as terrorist groups, and governments, for example, or in the realm of cyberspace? Carson mentions in passing the Obama administration’s reported decision to launch covert retaliatory cyber operations to respond to Russian interference in the 2016 election, and he briefly suggests that cyber technology may play a role similar to the invention of aerial bombing and submarine warfare: It creates new domains in which states can use force covertly. But more remains to be said. The domain of international political economy, meanwhile, is a significant omission from this book. Do states resort to similar escalation-control dynamics in trade disputes, by covering up their rivals’ use of nontariff barriers, for example?

Carson also pays little attention to features of domestic institutions that shape the ability of states to conduct covert action and collude in keeping secrets. Clearly, there are big differences in this regard between liberal democracies and autocracies. But even among democracies, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, substantial variation exists in the legal environment journalists face and the cultural norms under which they operate—all of which shape their relative deference to the executive and the relative likelihood with which state secrets will be exposed. Some of the normative consequences raised by Carson’s argument could also be explored with more subtlety. How, for example, should we judge democratic leaders for deceiving the public out of a reasonable desire to avoid wider wars?

Finally, Carson includes only a cursory discussion of an important development in

recent years: the increasing visibility of much covert action in the 21st century. Access to high-quality, commercially available satellite imagery; the proliferation of smartphones; the expansion of social media; the rise of a globalized civil society and of electronic whistleblowing; the emergence of private intelligence firms; and other technological advances have all made the exposure of covert programs increasingly common. Consider the emergence of Bellingcat, the group of researchers who apparently unmasked the Russian agents who traveled to the United Kingdom to poison Sergei Skripal, a former Russian spy. According to newspaper reports, British officials learned of several of Bellingcat's disclosures not long before the general public, prompting one analyst to announce the emergence of "a new frontier in terms of internet activism, or internet research" in which there "is a blurring of distinctions: States are increasingly losing their monopoly over spying. Now it belongs to anyone who has the brains, the spunk and the technological ability." Carson says that states will innovate and adapt to these trends, pointing out that they have done so in the past in response to other technological and social changes.

No doubt they will—but how exactly, and with what consequences? Carson suggests that states may shift to an increasing emphasis on "open secrecy," but he does not dwell on the implications of such a development.

None of this, however, should detract from Carson's achievement: "Secret Wars" is a fine book. In an age of "little green men" in Ukraine, external interventions by major powers across the Middle East, and covert Russian interference in Western elections, scholars and policymakers need to understand the ways in which governments use secrecy, how states communicate under anarchy, and when and why limited wars escalate into large-scale conflicts.

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